STUDIES IN THE WORKS OF ELLEN GLASGOW

BY
HUBERT BLAIR ROUSE
B.A., Randolph-Macon College, 1933
M.A., University of Virginia, 1938

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS
SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN
ENGLISH IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF
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To
ELLEN GLASGOW

A great lady and a distinguished interpreter of
American life

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STUDIES IN THE WORKS OF ELLEN GLASGOW

Ellen Anderson Gholson Glasgow was born on April 22, 1874, in Richmond, Virginia. She was the next to the youngest daughter of Frank T. and Anne Gholson Glasgow and one of a family of five daughters and two sons. On her father's side she is of Scotch-Irish Presbyterian ancestry while on her mother's side she traces her line to English people who settled in Tidewater Virginia early in the seventeenth century. Miss Glasgow was very nearly self-educated. As a child she attended private schools in Richmond for limited periods, but for the most part she was taught at home. She read widely and observed closely. Though she has made her home in Richmond for most of her life, Miss Glasgow has also spent much time in rural Virginia. For a few years she lived in New York City. She has also traveled extensively in Europe. Though she never attended any institution of higher learning as a student, she has received honorary degrees from several. In 1930 the University of North Carolina conferred the Litt.D. upon her. In 1938 the University of Richmond and Duke University conferred upon her the degree of Doctor of Laws and in 1939 she received this degree from the College of William and Mary. She is an honorary member of Alpha chapter of Phi Beta Kappa of the College of William and Mary. In 1940 she was awarded the Howells medal for eminence in creative literature by the American Academy of Arts and Letters as well as *The Saturday Review of Literature's* special award for service to American literature. The awarding of the Pulitzer prize to her novel, *In This Our Life,* is fitting recognition long delayed.

Ellen Glasgow has written prose fiction with distinction for more than forty-five years. She entered upon her destined career when still very young. From the beginning she set for herself the highest literary standards and from these she has never turned aside. For she sought to impart to Southern fiction the 'blood and irony" which she found lack-

ing. Moreover she set out to build a body of prose fiction distinguished by serious consideration of material and illuminated by beauty of style and form. The sudden flurry of interest and the small sensation of the one-book writer have not been her concern. Rather she has sought to place her name upon a body of work resting on a foundation of thoughtful observation of Southern life and people and inspired by a lofty artistic creed. Though Miss Glasgow has not been neglected by the discerning critic nor the general reader, her work has not received so wide a recognition as has been merited by novels of so high a calibre. Her more conservative methods and her abhorrence of the sentimental and sensational have caused her to be less noticed in times characterized by wide and varied experimentation and the use of startling themes and violent action in prose fiction. On the other hand, she has been marked for serious critical attention through most of her career and has not passed unsung. Now, in May, 1942, the standard of the Pulitzer awards has been appreciably raised by her latest book, *In This Our Life*, receiving the prize for the most distinguished novel of 1941.

There is a reasonably large body of reviews and critical articles on Miss Glasgow's fiction and some observations of greater length in works on the novel or on American literature, but longer critical essays are scarce. There have been a few master's theses of limited scope written on some aspects of Miss Glasgow's thought or art, but these have been relatively brief considerations and they have not attempted to present a comprehensive view of this novelist's aims and accomplishments. Nor have these investigations benefited by the use of the prefaces which Miss Glasgow placed before the twelve novels included in the Virginia Edition of her works.

In these studies it is my purpose to examine the products of Miss Glasgow's genius with regard to the attitudes and ideas which have inspired her interpretation of American lives and scenes and with attention to the artistic methods she has used in her practice of the art of the novel.

This monograph, it is hoped, may present a comprehensive view of the thought and art of this novelist, lead to a better understanding of her achievement, and bring about an increased awareness of the high standards she has followed in her craft and of her important contribution to prose fiction and American letters.

* * *

The chief reviews and criticisms of Miss Glasgow's work are studied in a chapter in which I have sought to give a cross-section of attitudes, both friendly and hostile, which have been expressed from the appearance of her earliest work to the present. I have examined a large portion of all that has been written about Miss Glasgow and have considered in this survey those reviews and essays which appeared representative of the more serious criticism of literature in their times. Miss Glasgow attracted attention in her first two books as a courageous writer who chose to treat life in its more serious aspects and who was evidently influenced by her interest in natural and social science as well as inspired by a spirit of rebellion against the vogue of sentimental romance. In succeeding years her chronicles of the social history of Virginia in fiction received wide critical acclaim as well as some unfavorable comment. She was recognized as a writer who interpreted the life of her state and its people with truthful realism and a keen intelligence and vision. She was also praised for her fine prose style, her skillful use of wit, irony, and epigram, her appreciation for beauty in scene and characterization, and her understanding of the tragic aspects of the human comedy. With the publication of *Barren Ground* in 1935 and of *Vein of Iron* in 1935 and of *The Romantic Comedians* (1926), *They Stooped to Folly* (1929), and *The Sheltered Life* (1932), her three tragi-comedies that appeared during this decade, Miss Glasgow's literary stature grew and she received even wider and more appreciative critical consideration. The appearance of the limited Virginia Edition of her works in twelve volumes in 1938, with critical pref-

aces by the author, was an occasion for renewed appraisal of her work. Her latest novel, *In This Our Life*, appeared in 1941 and measured up to the high standards of style and substance she had set for herself throughout her career.

* * *

In the chapter on Miss Glasgow as a critic, attention is given to her concern with the problems of literature and particularly to her expressions of opinion on the art of the novel and her practice of her craft. In her critical utterances in speeches, articles, and the prefaces to the novels in the Virginia Edition of her works, Miss Glasgow expressed many of the attitudes which are reflected in her fiction and told something of the genesis of her most important novels and of her methods in the writing of fiction. She insisted on the importance of the novelist being serious in his approach to his work and pointed out the need of perspective, discipline of mind, and a clear vision. She was very much concerned with the necessity of character in fiction and advocated the use of irony as an antidote for the decay found in sentimentality. She was opposed to hypocrisy and romantic illusion but not to honest sentiment sincerely expressed. In her opposition to the false optimism inspired by the spirit of evasive idealism she was fully as strong as she was to the neo-barbarism of violence and degeneracy so often to be found in contemporary literature. This spirit of evasive idealism was usually manifested in the late nineteenth century and on into the twentieth century by a refusal to admit the presence of anything unpleasant in one's environment or among one's associates or to recognize the existence of evil lest one should be thought to countenance it. Another aspect of this outlook on life was the deletion of almost all useful knowledge from the education of young girls. Evasive idealism was very much a part of the creed of the society in the South which Ellen Glasgow knew as a young girl. Against this spirit she rebelled early in her writing of novels. In more recent years she has been equally opposed to that school of fiction which glories in the treat-

ment of violence, degeneracy, and the more evil and horrid aspects of human existence in the name of a more advanced realism. Such writing she considers a twentieth century version of the Gothic romance but in no true sense honestly realistic interpretation of life. She expressed, in her criticism, her belief in the treatment of contemporary life in the novel through the medium of an optimistic realism. She looked upon these as creative necessities for the writer of fiction: ability to create life vividly and truthfully with passion and courage, desire to write so as to illuminate and interpret life, the need of intense experience, and the opportunity to transpose that experience into art. She recognized the humor and the romance in reality. Her social conscience manifests itself in a feeling of responsibility for world evil and a deeply rooted hatred of cruelty and, indeed, of all injustice and inhumanity. Toward her work as a writer of prose fiction she has thought of herself as neither pure romancer nor pure realist, but rather as a verist, one in whose writings are combined the features of both the romantic and realistic artist. She has favored the use of a romantic idealism flavored with irony. She has felt that evolution operated in the novel as well as elsewhere and in viewing the trends in modern literature in the South as well as in other parts of America she has seen democratic tendencies.

* * *

In the fifth and sixth chapters of this dissertation an examination is made of the classical and romantic aspects of Miss Glasgow's fiction. The classic side of Miss Glasgow's work is shown in her writing of the comedy of manners which is distinguished by her comic insight, her humor and epigrammatic wit, and the tender irony to be found in her handling of tragedy. The tolerance, restraint, and quality of universality in her fiction as well as her preoccupation with form and style have a classical flavor. She has followed the great tradition of the social comedy of manners with brilliant results. In such works as *Virginia* (1913), *Life and Gabriella* (1916), *The Romantic Comedians* (1926), *They*

Stooped to Folly (1929), and *The Sheltered Life* (1932) Miss Glasgow's talent in this genre is revealed.

The romantic side of Miss Glasgow's work is evident in occasional sentimental and melodramatic touches, in the poetic beauty of her treatment of Nature as well as in her love of beauty in the substance and form of her fiction. Her treatment of time and space takes on a poetic and romantic quality. This is found especially in *Barren Ground* (1925), *The Sheltered Life* (1932) and *Vein of Iron* (1935). Her interest in the rise of the lower clases in the south, as shown in *The Voice of the People* (1900) and *The Romance of a Plain Man* (1909), and her sensible feminism, as revealed in *Virginia* (1913) and *Life and Gabriella* (1916), are idealistically inspired. Furthermore her work is romantic in its treatment of gloom and despair, in her hatred of cruelty, her concern with fortitude, her realization of the tragedy underlying human existence, and her desire to discover and show the inner significance of man's relation to Nature and to the rest of mankind.

* * *

In the seventh chapter of the monograph are considered various historical, political, and social matters and their place and significance in Miss Glasgow's novels. Problems of heredity and environment received treatment in such works as *The Descendant* (1897), *Phases of an Inferior Planet* (1898), *The Voice of the People* (1900), *The Deliverance* (1904), *The Romance of a Plain Man* (1909), *The Miller of Old Church* (1911), *Virginia* (1913), and *Life and Gabriella* (1916), and were touched upon in more recent works such as *Barren Ground* (1925) and *Vein of Iron* (1935). Miss Glasgow has inclined toward the belief that environment exercises a greater power than heredity.

Almost all of her novels have portrayed aspects of the aristocratic life of the South. The importance of family traditions and family pride are revealed in such books as *The Battle-Ground* (1902) and *The Deliverance* (1904) and in the latter book one finds a vivid picture of the struggles of

the dispossessed aristocracy after the Civil War. The strengths and weaknesses of the aristocratic tradition are set forth in *The Ancient Law* (1908), *The Romance of a Plain Man* (1909), *The Miller of Old Church* (1911), and in the three more recent comedies of manners: *The Romantic Comedians* (1926), *They Stooped to Folly* (1929), and *The Sheltered Life* (1932).

Miss Glasgow's fiction has been outstanding for its depiction of the life of the lower and middle classes in the South and of the rise of those groups to greater importance for when she came to write of these people she was treating material hitherto almost entirely untouched in Virginia fiction. She portrayed the more bitter side of social transition in her study of the Fletchers in *The Deliverance* (1904). In *The Voice of the People* (1900) she treated the rise of a poor country boy to political prominence while in *The Romance of a Plain Man* (1909) she told of the rise of a poor lad to business success in an urban environment. She again treated this social transition and progress toward a higher degree of democracy in *The Miller of Old Church* (1911). In *Virginia* (1913) and *Life and Gabriella* (1916) she struck sharp blows against the smothering effects of that attitude in manners and education which decreed that recognizing an evil was countenancing it and so refused to admit to thought anything unpleasant. In *Barren Ground* (1925) and *Vein of Iron* (1935) she celebrated the virtue of great courage. In nearly all of her novels of Virginia life and manners she has shown an intelligent recognition of Puritan influences as well as those of Cavalier origin.

* * *

The eighth chapter of the dissertation is devoted to a discussion of Miss Glasgow's interpretation of the Virginia Negro. In view of the rather general critical neglect of this aspect of Miss Glasgow's characterizations, it is worthy of full treament. In many of her novels Miss Glasgow has written of the Negro with sympathetic understanding. She has not used this race for comic relief but has recognized

the Negro as an important and integral part of Virginia life. The characterizations of Negroes in *The Voice of the People* (1900), *The Battle-Ground* (1902), *Barren Ground* (1925), and *In This Our Life* (1941) are especially noteworthy. Aspects of Southern race relations not so generally considered in its fiction are treated frankly and with keen insight into the tragic implications for both the white and black races in *Virginia* (1913) and *The Sheltered Life* (1932).

* * *

The ninth chapter presents various regional aspects of Miss Glasgow's fiction which contribute to her realistic portrayal of Southern life. Her honestly realistic treatment of these regional aspects of her fiction has resulted in faithful interpretations of people, scene, atmosphere, and spirit of Southside, Piedmont, and Tidewater Virginia, the Great Valley, and of Richmond and her imaginary city of Queenborough in which she has sought to incorporate the essence of all Virginia towns and cities with respect to their manners and customs, their atmosphere and their people. Her treatment of Virginia scenes and characters is never "local color" writing in its more usual form, but an interpretation of the life of her place and time which carries a living, breathing reality and conviction.

* * *

The romantic and realistic aspects of Miss Glasgow's fiction are by no means incompatible, for the highest idealism is that which shows an understanding of the idealistic side of man's nature and the importance of the imagination in his life. The realistic view of things does not preclude seeing life as it should be. Miss Glasgow has not been a member of that school of realism which sees the universe through a dull grey veil of sordidness and evil nor has she followed the more recent fashion for a lurid world of violence, brutality, and sensation very largely for sensation's sake. For a truly realistic interpretation of life goes much deeper into the realms of the spirit and far beyond man's

animal reactions. Moreover, Miss Glasgow regards art in fiction as being related to beauty of style and structure. Hence she has not produced amorphous novels devoid of beauty of prose or form. She has been moved by an interest in ideas but has passed her thoughts through the transforming processes of her creative imagination so as to produce the illusion of reality in her work. She is a realist in the highest sense in that she not only records the outward aspects of man and his environment but also is sharply aware of the gulf that lies between man's hopes and his achievement, of the conflict between his aspiration and his daily round. She has illuminated life in her interpretations of man's inner consciousness as well as of his outward existence. She is a realist of the soul as well as of the material world.

* * *

In the eleventh chapter of the dissertation further clarification of Miss Glasgow's place as a writer of prose fiction is provided by an examination of the forces which have influenced her and of contrasts and comparisons with the work of other writers. This novelist's interest in scientific and social problems grew out of a youthful reading of works of natural and social science which resulted in a serious intellectual attitude and a philosophical cast of thought that caused her to rebel against evasion, hypocrisy, and sentimentality wherever she encountred them. She considers Darwin's *Origin of Species* especially important as an early influence.

In her handling of regional matters of scene and characterization Miss Glasgow is comparable to James Lane Allen and Pearl Buck. Her work lacks Allen's tendency to frequent pointing of morals. She has not introduced the false optimism and sentimental romance too often found in the fiction of the "local color" school into her own work.

In her interpretation of the spirit of her time and place Miss Glasgow's fiction can be compared to that of Flaubert, Balzac, and Maupassant among the great French novelists,

to Jane Austen, Thackeray, and Dickens among the English novelists, and to Edith Wharton, Sinclair Lewis and John Steinbeck in America. Her work lacks the vicious satire of Lewis and is not so narrowly circumscribed in setting and characters as is that of Mrs. Wharton. She has not chosen to write, in the name of realism, fiction surfeited with evil and sordidness after the manner of James T. Farrell or to portray the moronic, degraded characters favored by Erskine Caldwell. Her realistic portrayal of scene and character was apparently influenced by the French realists mentioned above to a large extent. Her characterization is reminiscent of the work of Balzac; her attention to style and her recognition of and concern for interpreting the subtle human relationships remind one of Maupassant. In her treatment of rural characters and scenes and in her awareness of man's conflict with Fate, Miss Glasgow may remind the reader of Thomas Hardy. In her explorations into the minds and emotions of her characters and in her high artistic integrity, she can be compared to Henry James.

She has inherited the traditions of the novel of manners as practiced by Fielding, Jane Austen, Thackeray, Meredith, John Galsworthy, Edith Wharton, and John P. Marquand. Her work may be compared to the fiction of these and other writers of social comedy in its wit, irony, and epigrammatic flavor.

In her ability to see beneath outer appearances and to catch the inner significances of human existence, she is to be compared to Balzac, Maupassant, Henry James, and, among contemporaries, to John Steinbeck and John P. Marquand. Though her materials differ greatly from Steinbeck's, both novelists possess a similar appreciation of the power of courage, the same sympathetic insight and sense of pity, and the same serious attitude toward the practice of their craft. With Marquand the comparison is closer in that both have written novels of manners distinguished for clear, understanding observation, balanced perspective, and a recognition of the tragic aspects that lie beneath the life of an aristocratic group even in the midst of outward comedy.

In its expression of her inner consciousness of the eternal struggle of man for that toward which he aspires but can never entirely achieve, Miss Glasgow's work is comparable to that of Thackeray and Hardy, of Balzac and Flaubert, of Melville, Marquand, and Steinbeck.

* * *

The world of letters is heavily indebted to Ellen Glasgow for work of distinction imbued with idealism and the highest integrity of artistic conscience and faithfulness in the practice of her craft. American literature and especially Southern writing has been enriched by her thoughtful, brilliant, and illuminating interpretations of scene, atmosphere, and character. She has glowingly reflected her time and place in her serious realistic portrayals and in the subtle revelations of her tragi-comedies.

CHRONOLOGICAL LIST OF THE WORKS OF ELLEN GLASGOW

1. *The Descendant* (1897).
2. *Phases of an Inferior Planet* (1898).
3. *The Voice of the People* (1900).
4. *The Freeman and Other Poems* (1902).
5. *The Battle-Ground* (1902).
6. *The Deliverance* (1904).
7. *The Wheel of Life* (1906).
8. *The Ancient Law* (1908).
9. *The Romance of a Plain Man* (1909).
10. *The Miller of Old Church* (1911).
11. *Virginia* (1913).
12. *Life and Gabriella* (1916).
13. *The Builders* (1919).
14. *One Man in His Time* (1922).
15. *The Shadowy Third and Other Stories* (1923).
16. *Barren Ground* (1925).
17. *The Romantic Comedians* (1926).
18. *The Stooped to Folly* (1929).
19. *The Sheltered Life* (1932).
20. *Vein of Iron* (1935).
21. *In This Our Life* (1941).

VITA

Hubert Blair Rouse, son of Edgar Hubert and Elizabeth (Button) Rouse, was born October 31, 1912, in Orange, Virginia. He attended the public schools of Orange and entered Randolph-Macon College at Ashland, Virginia, in September, 1929. From this institution he received the degree of Bachelor of Arts in June, 1933. He taught Latin and English in the high school at Marshall, Virginia, from 1932 to 1936. With the aid of summer work at the University of Virginia, he completed the work for his degree so that he was able to teach during the school session of 1932-1933. He taught English in the high school at Harrisonburg, Virginia, from 1936 to 1940. Through work in the summers from 1933 through 1937, he earned the Master of Arts degree at the University of Virginia which he received in June, 1938. He traveled through the British Isles and France in the summer of 1938. In September, 1940, he came to the University of Illinois on a fellowship in English which he held during the two years he worked for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. He is a member of the Modern Language Association of America and of Phi Beta Kappa to which he was elected in March, 1942, at the University of Illinois.